



**ADVENT**  
GUIDE 2019

# ***AN INTRODUCTION TO ADVENT***

Advent is a word that means “coming” or “arrival.” It is a four-week period in which the church looks back to Jesus’ first coming as our Savior, and it looks forward to his second coming as our Judge. Just as John the Baptist told the Jewish people to “prepare” for the Lord’s coming, we need to encourage each other to be ready for his coming again when he will fulfill God’s promises and renew all things. Indeed, the Kingdom of God will come “on earth as it is in heaven.” As Isaiah the prophet says, “Prepare the way for the Lord... The glory of the Lord will be revealed, and all people will see it together” (Isaiah 40:3-5).

So what do we do during Advent? We wait and we prepare ourselves. We commit ourselves to spiritual renewal through weekly Sunday evening gatherings and daily meditation and study in this guide. We walk through special prayers, readings and activities both individually and with our families or friend groups. We tell others about the fulfilled promise in Jesus’ coming as a baby and his return to be King and to put the world to right. We pray the final prayer in the Bible, “Come, Lord Jesus!” (Revelation 22:20).

## ***HOW IS ADVENT DIFFERENT FROM CHRISTMAS?***

Christmas is a word that derives from “Christ Mass,” the celebration of the birth of Jesus. It is a period in which the church rejoices over the Incarnation (becoming really human) of Jesus. Advent expectations have been fulfilled, the long-awaited Messiah has come, the freedom has been born into the world, a new day has dawned. God became man to destroy the evil that destroys us, to restore creatures to their Creator, and to give us eternal life. God united himself with humans in order for humans to be reunited with God. As John says in his Gospel, “The Word became flesh and made his dwelling among us. We have seen his glory, the glory of the one and only Son, who came from the Father, full of grace and truth” (John 1:14). This is why the angels praised God at Jesus’ birth saying, “Glory to God in the highest heaven” (Luke 2:14). So what do we do during Christmas? We rejoice in Emmanuel, God with us. Beginning with Christmas Eve, we party! In some families, it is traditional to give Christmas gifts for each of the twelve days of Christmas (Dec. 25 – Jan. 5). Moreover, celebrating Christmas means that we focus on becoming more like Christ who “came not to be served but to serve and give his life as a ransom for many” (Mark 10:45). Thus, Christmas is an exercise in humility. As Paul says, “Do nothing out of selfish ambition or vain conceit. Rather, in humility value others above yourselves, not looking to your own interests but each of you to the interests of the others. In your relationships with one another, have the same attitude of mind Christ Jesus had: Who, being in very nature God, did not consider equality with God something to be used to his own advantage; rather, he made himself nothing by taking the very nature of a servant, being made in human likeness” (Philippians 2:3-7). While we party at Christmas, we also look for ways to be united with Jesus in his humiliation so that others in our lives can know the joy of the Incarnation, God with us. Because of his coming, we are free to be united with him in all that we think, say and do.

## ***WHAT’S IN THE ADVENT GUIDE?***

This guide is intended to be an all-encompassing tool and framework for you to use for the Advent season. If you’ve never celebrated Advent in this way, you will find this to be a helpful instruction to all that this season can be for you and your household. If you are familiar with Advent, you will find this framework to be a comforting reminder of the purpose of this time together: focusing our hearts, minds and hands on the coming light of Christ to this earth to set us free to live a new life. This resource is divided up into the four weeks, and there is a set of elements for each week. We suggest setting aside a time each week (maybe Sunday afternoon before coming to the Advent service?) to walk through the weekly elements. You can also use this weekly time together to light the Advent candle in your home wreath (see page 8 for easy instructions on creating an Advent wreath). This guide can be used as a family resource or for an individual devotion. Either way, Advent is meant to be shared together, so make sure to stay connected with us through our Sunday evening gatherings!

# ***WEEKLY ELEMENTS IN THIS GUIDE***

## **1. WEEKLY READINGS**

This is a systematic order of daily readings from the Bible with selections from the Old Testament, Psalms, New Testament, and Gospels. You might read each Scripture every day of the week or spread it out throughout the week. It is recommended that you read these Scriptures from multiple translations (ESV, NIV, NLT, NASB, and The Message are good places to start). Reading these verses as a group AND individually is a great practice to allow the Scripture to come alive in your Advent weeks.

## **2. WEEKLY PRAYER**

Just like the readings, this weekly prayer is intended to be used multiple times in your week. Use it before dinner or breakfast, pray it at bedtime, or speak it as you drive to and from work or school. These prayers are traditionally called the "collect" of the Advent week because they "collect" the theme of the week into one prayer! This section is written primarily for adults.

## **3. WEEKLY REFLECTION**

These reflections are originally written reflections meant to encourage your own. You might read these reflections each week after the Advent service or each morning when you get up. This section is written primarily for adults.

## **4. FAMILY ACTIVITIES**

This section has three different elements for you and your family.

1. The "Conversation" piece is a set of questions about the weekly theme that will spark some great discussion among your family about God's hope, peace, joy and love.
2. The "Craft" piece gives an activity that you can do with your family to help make the Advent season tangible and real in your home.
3. The "Community" piece gives an idea of something you and your family can do for someone else. This is a great time to talk to your children about practicing the humility and love that God displayed in Jesus.

## **5. DAILY MEDITATIONS**

If you are looking for even more devotional material during this season, these daily meditations will be perfect for you! With an additional Scripture to read and a brief thought about how this Scripture plays into the overall narrative of God's love, these daily readings call us to an even greater understanding of how much God loves us and wants us to be a part of his story. This section is written primarily for adults.

# ***AN ENCOURAGEMENT FOR FAMILIES***

Advent is an excellent time of the year to create family traditions and cultivate a culture of worship with your children. Family worship can be wonderfully informal. Depending on your circumstances, attentiveness of the children, etc. plan on anywhere from 10-20 minutes. Perhaps you might:

- Sing your favorite Advent and Christmas songs
- Read and discuss the Scripture lesson
- Light the Advent candle
- Pray together

# ADDITIONAL WAYS TO EXPERIENCE ADVENT

## ADVENT SERVICES

There will be special Advent worship services each Sunday at 5:00pm in the Adult Worship Center. Make it a priority to be a part of those peaceful services each week as we celebrate together. Over the next few weeks, we will gather to wait and to expect the “coming toward” of Jesus Christ that brings each of us freedom. And in our waiting, we will celebrate the hope, peace, joy and love that is found in the coming light of Christ. Make it a priority to be a part of those peaceful services each week as we celebrate together.

## DIGITAL VERSION

This guide is also available for download at [cco.church/advent](http://cco.church/advent)

## THANK YOU

We are gratefully indebted to Christ Church Eastbay in Berkeley, CA for allowing us to adapt their Advent resource. The format for this resource, as well as many of the prayers and family elements, came from a document they produced a few years ago. They graciously gave us permission to use what they wrote and reshape it for our context here in Oronogo. Thank you, Christ Church Eastbay!

Additionally, this year’s daily devotions were taken with permission from the Advent resource “Good News of Great Joy: Daily Readings for Advent” by John Piper, © Desiring God. Website: [DesiringGod.org](http://DesiringGod.org).

## ADDITIONAL ADVENT RESOURCES

### BOOKS

*God Is in the Manger: Reflections on Advent and Christmas*

by Dietrich Bonhoeffer

*The Greatest Gift: Unwrapping the Full Love Story of Christmas*

by Ann Voskamp

*Advent Storybook*

by Antonie Schneider

*Waiting Here For You: An Advent Journey Of Hope*

by Louie Giglio

*We Light the Candles: Devotions Related to Family Use of the Advent Wreath*

by Catharine Brandt

*Watch for the Light: Readings for Advent and Christmas*

*The Advent Jesse Tree: Devotions for Children and Adults to Prepare for the Coming of the Christ Child at Christmas*

### WEBSITES

*Advent Conspiracy*

[adventconspiracy.org](http://adventconspiracy.org)

*10 Advent Songs to Remind You It's Not Yet Christmas*

[focusoncampus.org/content/10-advent-songs-to-remind-you-its-not-yet-christmas](http://focusoncampus.org/content/10-advent-songs-to-remind-you-its-not-yet-christmas)

*All About Advent*

[loyolapress.com/our-catholic-faith/liturgical-year/advent](http://loyolapress.com/our-catholic-faith/liturgical-year/advent)

*Ann Voskamp: Advent*

[annvoskamp.com/?s=advent](http://annvoskamp.com/?s=advent)

*Top 10 Advent Resources*

[sojo.net/magazine/december-2012/top-10-advent-resources-2012](http://sojo.net/magazine/december-2012/top-10-advent-resources-2012)

# ***HOPE***

W E E K 1

## ***ELEMENTS THIS WEEK***

### ***BREATHE IN***

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### ***BREATHE OUT***

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## **WEEKLY READINGS**

### **ISAIAH 2:1-5 (ESV)**

1 The word that Isaiah son of Amoz saw concerning Judah and Jerusalem. 2 In days to come the mountain of the Lord's house shall be established as the highest of the mountains, and shall be raised above the hills; all the nations shall stream to it. 3 Many peoples shall come and say, "Come, let us go up to the mountain of the LORD, to the house of the God of Jacob; that he may teach us his ways and that we may walk in his paths." For out of Zion shall go forth instruction, and the word of the LORD from Jerusalem. 4 He shall judge between the nations, and shall arbitrate for many peoples; they shall beat their swords into plowshares, and their spears into pruning hooks; nation shall not lift up sword against nation, neither shall they learn war any more. 5 O house of Jacob, come, let us walk in the light of the LORD!

### **PSALM 122:1-9 (ESV)**

1 I was glad when they said to me, "Let us go to the house of the LORD!" 2 Our feet are standing within your gates, O Jerusalem. 3 Jerusalem built as a city that is bound firmly together. 4 To it the tribes go up, the tribes of the LORD, as was decreed for Israel, to give thanks to the name of the LORD. 5 For there the thrones for judgment were set up, the thrones of the house of David. 6 Pray for the peace of Jerusalem: "May they prosper who love you. 7 Peace be within your walls, and security within your towers." 8 For the sake of my relatives and friends I will say, "Peace be within you." 9 For the sake of the house of the LORD our God, I will seek your good.

### **ROMANS 13:11-14 (ESV)**

11 Besides this, you know what time it is, how it is now the moment for you to wake from sleep. For salvation is nearer to us now than when we became believers; 12 the night is far gone, the day is near. Let us then lay aside the works of darkness and put on the armor of light; 13 let us live honorably as in the day, not in reveling and drunkenness, not in debauchery and licentiousness, not in quarreling and jealousy. 14 Instead, put on the Lord Jesus Christ, and make no provision for the flesh, to gratify its desires.

### **MATTHEW 24:36-44 (ESV)**

36 "But about that day and hour no one knows, neither the angels of heaven, nor the Son, but only the Father. 37 For as the days of Noah were, so will be the coming of the Son of Man. 38 For as in those days before the flood they were eating and drinking, marrying and giving in marriage, until the day Noah entered the ark, 39 and they knew nothing until the flood came and swept them all away, so too will be the coming of the Son of Man. 40 Then two will be in the

field; one will be taken and one will be left. 41 Two women will be grinding meal together; one will be taken and one will be left. 42 Keep awake therefore, for you do not know on what day your Lord is coming. 43 But understand this: if the owner of the house had known in what part of the night the thief was coming, he would have stayed awake and would not have let his house be broken into. 44 Therefore you also must be ready, for the Son of Man is coming at an unexpected hour.

## **WEEKLY REFLECTION**

Oh great King what hope you have given us! We were chained to an anchor meant for destruction. Each passing day became a further indictment against us, yet each passing day became a passage to your promise; the great word spoken from the beginning inching its way to completion. Hope dawned when you descended into hell and untethered those links from the great anchor of our iniquity and joined them to your own fetter. Ascending into heaven, your life became for us an immovable weight of hope; each day no longer an indictment, but a testimony of the great Kingdom that is and is to come.

## **WEEKLY PRAYER**

God of hope,  
you are the anchor for our soul.  
You are powerful.  
You are mighty.  
You are holy.  
You are good.

Your hope is a constant reminder to us  
that you are working for our good and your glory.  
Your hope gives us meaning and purpose in this life  
as we anticipate the great perfection of the next.

May the hope we have for tomorrow  
change the way we experience today.  
Help us to develop a constant anticipation  
of all that you promise to bring.  
May we receive your word  
so that we can extend it to others.

May this Advent season refresh us in the truth.  
You have come, and you will come again.  
Let this time be one of reflection and surrender  
as we escape from the pressures and distractions  
that invade our time with you.

Amen

# DAILY MEDITATIONS

## SUNDAY (DECEMBER 1)

### THIS WE KNOW

You are who say you are  
You'll do what you say You'll do  
You'll be who you've always been to us  
Jesus

Our hope is in you alone  
Our strength in your mighty name  
Our peace in the darkest day remains  
Jesus

*This we know  
We will see the enemy run  
This we know  
We will see the victory come  
We hold on to every promise you ever made  
Jesus, you are unfailing*

Our God through the wilderness  
And our joy in the heaviness  
Our way when it seems there is no way  
Jesus

We trust you  
We trust you  
Your ways are higher than our own

### **Candle Lighting Reading #1 - from The Worship Sourcebook, p.444, #34:**

Prepare the way of the Lord.  
Tonight we light the first candle in hope,  
the hope of our coming Savior, Jesus.  
Prepare, then, the way of the Lord.

### **Call & Response (Psalm 130 NIV):**

**Leader:** (1) Out of the depths I cry to you, Lord;  
**People:** (2) Lord, hear our voice. Let your ears be attentive to our cry for mercy.  
**Leader:** (3) If you, Lord, kept a record of sins, Lord, who could stand?  
**People:** (4) But with you there is forgiveness, so that we, with reverence, serve you.

**Leader:** (5) I wait for the Lord, my whole being waits, and in his word I put my hope.

**People:** (6) We wait for the Lord more than watchmen wait for the morning, more than watchmen wait for the morning.

**Leader:** (7) Israel, put your hope in the Lord, for with the Lord is unfailing love and with him is full redemption.

**People:** (8) He himself will redeem Israel from all their sins.

## MONDAY (DECEMBER 2)

### PREPARE THE WAY

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*"He will turn many of the children of Israel to the Lord their God, and he will go before him in the spirit and power of Elijah, to turn the hearts of the fathers to the children, and the disobedient to the wisdom of the just, to make ready for the Lord a people prepared."  
—Luke 1:16-17*

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What John the Baptist did for Israel, Advent can do for us. Don't let Christmas find you unprepared. I mean spiritually unprepared. Its joy and impact will be so much greater if you are ready!

That you might be prepared...

First, meditate on the fact that we need a Savior. Christmas is an indictment before it becomes a delight. It will not have its intended effect until we feel desperately the need for a Savior. Let these short Advent meditations help awaken in you a bittersweet sense of need for the Savior.

Second, engage in sober self-examination. Advent is to Christmas what Lent is to Easter. "Search me, O God, and know my heart! Try me and know my thoughts! And see if there be any wicked way in me, and lead me in the way everlasting!" (Psalm 139:23-24) Let every heart prepare him room... by cleaning house.

Third, build God-centered anticipation and expectancy and excitement into your home—especially for the children. If you are excited about Christ, they will be too. If you can only make Christmas exciting with material things, how will the children get a thirst for God? Bend the efforts of your imagination to make the wonder of the King's arrival visible for the children.

Fourth, be much in the Scriptures, and memorize the great passages! "Is not my word like fire, says the Lord!" (Jeremiah 23:29) Gather 'round that fire this Advent season. It is warm. It is sparkling with colors of grace. It is healing for a thousand hurts. It is light for dark nights.

## TUESDAY (DECEMBER 3)

### MARY'S MAGNIFICENT GOD

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*"My soul magnifies the Lord, and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, for he has looked on the humble estate of his servant. For behold, from now on all generations will call me blessed; for he who is mighty has done great things for me and holy is his name. And his mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts; he has brought down the mighty from their thrones and exalted those of humble estate; he has filled the hungry with good things, and the rich he has sent away empty. He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, as he spoke to our fathers, to Abraham and to his offspring forever." –Luke 1:46-55*

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Mary sees clearly a most remarkable thing about God: He is about to change the course of all human history. The most important three decades in all of time are about to begin.

And where is God? Occupying himself with two obscure, humble women—one old and barren (Elizabeth), one young and virginal (Mary). And Mary is so moved by this vision of God, the lover of the lowly, that she breaks out in song – a song that has come to be known as "the Magnificat" (Luke 1:46-55).

Mary and Elizabeth are wonderful heroines in Luke's account. He loves the faith of these women. The thing that impresses him most, it appears, and the thing he wants to impress on Theophilus, his noble reader, is the lowliness and cheerful humility of Elizabeth and Mary.

Elizabeth says, "Why is this granted to me that the mother of my Lord would come to me?" (Luke 1:43). And Mary says, "He has looked on the humble estate of his servant" (Luke 1:48).

The only people whose soul can truly magnify the Lord are people like Elizabeth and Mary—people who acknowledge their lowly estate and are overwhelmed by the condescension of the magnificent God.

## WEDNESDAY (DECEMBER 4)

### THE LONG-AWAITED VISITATION

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*"Blessed be the Lord God of Israel, for he has visited and redeemed his people and has raised up a horn of salvation for us in the house of his servant David, as he spoke by the mouth of his holy prophets from of old, that we should be saved from our enemies and from the hand of all who hate us..." –Luke 1:68-71*

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Notice two remarkable things from these words of Zechariah in Luke 1.

First, nine months earlier, Zechariah could not believe his wife would have a child. Now, filled with the Holy Spirit, he is so confident of God's redeeming work in the coming Messiah that he puts it in the past tense. For the mind of faith, a promised act of God is as good as done. Zechariah has learned to take God at his word and so has a remarkable assurance: "God has visited and redeemed!"

Second, the coming of Jesus the Messiah is a visitation of God to our world: "The God of Israel has visited and redeemed." For centuries, the Jewish people had languished under the conviction that God had withdrawn: the spirit of prophecy had ceased, Israel had fallen into the hands of Rome. And all the godly in Israel were awaiting the visitation of God. Luke tells us in 2:25 that the devout Simeon was "looking for the consolation of Israel." And in Luke 2:38 the prayerful Anna was "looking for the redemption of Jerusalem."

These were days of great expectation. Now the long-awaited visitation of God was about to happen—indeed, he was about to come in a way no one expected.

## THURSDAY (DECEMBER 5)

### FOR GOD'S LITTLE PEOPLE

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*"In those days a decree went out from Caesar Augustus that all the world should be registered. This was the first registration when Quirinius was governor of Syria. And all went to be registered, each to his own town. And Joseph also went up from Galilee, from the town of Nazareth, to Judea, to the city of David, which is called Bethlehem, because he was of the house and lineage of David, to be registered with Mary, his betrothed, who was with child." –Luke 2:1-5*

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Have you ever thought what an amazing thing it is that God ordained beforehand that the Messiah be born in Bethlehem (as the prophecy in Micah 5 shows); and that he so ordained things that when the time came, the Messiah's mother and legal father were living in Nazareth; and that in order to fulfill his word and bring two little people to Bethlehem that first Christmas, God put it in the heart of Caesar Augustus that all the Roman world should be enrolled each in his own town?

Have you ever felt, like me, little and insignificant in a world of seven billion people, where all the news is of big political and economic and social movements and of out-standing people with lots of power and prestige?

If you have, don't let that make you disheartened or unhappy. For it is implicit in Scripture that all the mammoth political forces and all the giant industrial complexes, without their even knowing it, are being guided by God, not for their own sake but for the sake of God's little people—the little Mary and the little Joseph who have to be got from Nazareth to Bethlehem. God wields an empire to bless his children.

Do not think, because you experience adversity, that the hand of the Lord is shortened. It is not our prosperity but our holiness that he seeks with all his heart. And to that end, he rules the whole world. As Proverbs 21:1 says,

"The king's heart is a stream of water in the hand of the Lord; he turns it wherever he will."

He is a big God for little people, and we have great cause to rejoice that, unbeknownst to them, all the kings and presidents and premiers and chancellors of the world follow the sovereign decrees of our Father in heaven, that we, the children, might be conformed to the image of his Son, Jesus Christ.

## FRIDAY (DECEMBER 6)

### NO DETOUR FROM CALVARY

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*"And while they were there, the time came for her to give birth. And she gave birth to her firstborn son and wrapped him in swaddling cloths and laid him in a manger, because there was no place for them in the inn." –Luke 2:6-7*

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Now you would think that if God so rules the world as to use an empire-wide census to bring Mary and Joseph to Bethlehem, he surely could have seen to it that a room was available in the inn.

Yes, he could have. And Jesus could have been born into a wealthy family. He could have turned stone into bread in the

wilderness. He could have called 10,000 angels to his aid in Gethsemane. He could have come down from the cross and saved himself. The question is not what God could do, but what he willed to do.

God's will was that though Christ was rich, yet for your sake he became poor. The "No Vacancy" signs over all the motels in Bethlehem were for your sake. "For your sake he became poor" (2 Corinthians 8:9).

God rules all things—even motel capacities—for the sake of his children. The Calvary road begins with a "No Vacancy" sign in Bethlehem and ends with the spitting and scoffing of the cross in Jerusalem. And we must not forget that he said, "He who would come after me must deny himself and take up his cross" (Matthew 16:24).

We join him on the Calvary road and hear him say, "Remember the word that I said to you, 'A servant is not greater than his master.' If they persecuted me, they will persecute you" (John 15:20).

To the one who calls out enthusiastically, "I will follow you wherever you go!" (Matthew 8:19). Jesus responds, "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has nowhere to lay his head" (Matthew 8:20). Yes, God could have seen to it that Jesus have a room at his birth. But that would have been a detour off the Calvary road.

## SATURDAY (DECEMBER 7)

### PEACE TO THOSE WITH WHOM HE'S PLEASED

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*"And this will be a sign for you: you will find a baby wrapped in swaddling cloths and lying in a manger." And suddenly there was with the angel a multitude of the heavenly host praising God and saying, "Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace among those with whom he is pleased!" –Luke 2:12-14*

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Peace for whom? There is a somber note sounded in the angels' praise. Peace among men on whom his favor rests. Peace among men with whom he is pleased. Without faith it is impossible to please God. So Christmas does not bring peace to all.

"This is the judgment," Jesus said, "that the light has come into the world and men loved darkness rather than the light because their deeds are evil" (John 3:19). Or as the aged Simeon said when he saw the child Jesus, "Behold this child is set for the fall and rising of many in Israel and for a sign that is spoken against... that the thoughts of many hearts may be revealed" (Luke 2:34-35). O, how many there are

(CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE)

who look out on a bleak and chilly Christmas day and see no more than that.

“He came to his own and his own received him not, but to as many as received him to them gave he the power to become the sons of God, to as many as believed on his name.” It was only to his disciples that Jesus said, “Peace I leave with you. My peace I give to you; not as the world gives do I give to you. Let not your heart be troubled, neither let it be afraid.”

The people who enjoy the peace of God that surpasses all understanding are those who in everything by prayer and supplication let their requests be made known to God.

The key that unlocks the treasure chest of God’s peace is faith in the promises of God. So Paul prays, “May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing” (Romans 15:13). And when we do trust the promises of God and have joy and peace and love, then God is glorified.

Glory to God in the highest, and on earth peace to men with whom he is pleased—men who would believe.

## **CONVERSATION**

1. When have you had to wait for something to come?
2. Why is it so hard to wait for the things that we want or need?
3. How does God give you the freedom to be hopeful?
4. What is something you are hoping for right now?
5. Does hope always mean that things will have to change?
6. What is the difference between a wish and a hope?
7. Who do you know that needs prayer for hope?

## **COMMUNITY**

This week, take some time to send a message of hope to one of our impact partners around the country or around the world. This can be a great family activity to talk about the place where the missionary is serving, what it means to be a missionary, etc. For a list of Christ’s Church of Oronogo’s impact partners and a way to contact each of them, visit [cco.church/impact](http://cco.church/impact).

## **CRAFT**

### MAKE AN ADVENT WREATH FOR YOUR HOME

#### MATERIALS NEEDED:

- 5 candles: 3 purple, 1 pink, 1 white
- Greenery to wrap at base of candles
- Ribbon (optional)
- Lighter

The Advent Wreath is a visible reminder of the coming light of Christ in your home. Each week you light one more candle, until Christmas Eve, when you light the Christ Candle. Most families light it each night when the family is at home together and then extinguish the candles before bed.

The Advent Wreath for your home can be as simple or as elaborate as you and your family would like to make it. There is no “right” way to make an Advent Wreath, but there are some main components to include:

- 5 candles: 3 purple, 1 pink, 1 white. (If you can’t find colored candles, you can wrap them in colored ribbon)
- Some greenery, either real or fake, to form a circle around the candles.
- Ribbon or other decorations to wrap around the whole wreath

The candles are to be lit in this order: November 27 - light the first purple candle; December 4 add the second purple candle; December 11 - add the pink candle; December 18 - add the third purple candle; December 24 - add the white candle in the center.

The Advent Wreath sits on a table or bookshelf, not hung up on a door like a traditional wreath. You will actually be lighting the candles, so be careful where you place it! Just place the purple and pink candles in the four points of a circle, like the directions on a compass. The white candle goes in the middle of the circle. Use the greenery, like evergreen branches or garland, to wrap around the candle circle. Feel free to get as decorative and elaborate as you like with your Advent Wreath. You can make this a yearly tradition for your family!

# *PEACE*

## WEEK 2

### *ELEMENTS THIS WEEK*

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## **WEEKLY READINGS**

### **ISAIAH 11:1-10 (ESV)**

1 A shoot shall come out from the stump of Jesse, and a branch shall grow out of his roots. 2 The spirit of the LORD shall rest on him, the spirit of wisdom and understanding, the spirit of counsel and might, the spirit of knowledge and the fear of the LORD. 3 His delight shall be in the fear of the LORD. He shall not judge by what his eyes see, or decide by what his ears hear; 4 but with righteousness he shall judge the poor, and decide with equity for the meek of the earth; he shall strike the earth with the rod of his mouth, and with the breath of his lips he shall kill the wicked. 5 Righteousness shall be the belt around his waist, and faithfulness the belt around his loins. 6 The wolf shall live with the lamb, the leopard shall lie down with the kid, the calf and the lion and the fatling together, and a little child shall lead them. 7 The cow and the bear shall graze, their young shall lie down together; and the lion shall eat straw like the ox. 8 The nursing child shall play over the hole of the asp, and the weaned child shall put its hand on the adder's den. 9 They will not hurt or destroy on all my holy mountain; for the earth will be full of the knowledge of the LORD as the waters cover the sea. 10 On that day the root of Jesse shall stand as a signal to the peoples; the nations shall inquire of him, and his dwelling shall be glorious.

### **PSALM 72:1-7, 18-19 (ESV)**

1 Give the king your justice, O God, and your righteousness to a king's son. 2 May he judge your people with righteousness, and your poor with justice. 3 May the mountains yield prosperity for the people, and the hills, in righteousness. 4 May he defend the cause of the poor of the people, give deliverance to the needy, and crush the oppressor. 5 May he live while the sun endures, and as long as the moon, throughout all generations. 6 May he be like rain that falls on the mown grass, like showers that water the earth. 7 In his days may righteousness flourish and peace abound, until the moon is no more. 18 Blessed be the LORD, the God of Israel, who alone does wondrous things. 19 Blessed be his glorious name forever; may his glory fill the whole earth. Amen and Amen.

### **ROMANS 15:4-13 (ESV)**

4 For whatever was written in former days was written for our instruction, so that by steadfastness and by the encouragement of the scriptures we might have hope. 5 May the God of steadfastness and encouragement grant you to live in harmony with one another, in accordance with Christ Jesus, 6 that together you may with one voice glorify the God and Father of our Lord Jesus Christ.

7 Welcome one another, therefore, just as Christ has welcomed you, for the glory of God. 8 For I tell you that Christ has become a servant of the circumcised on behalf of the truth of God in order that he might confirm the promises given to the patriarchs, 9 and in order that the Gentiles might glorify God for his mercy. As it is written, "Therefore I will confess you among the Gentiles, and sing praises to your name"; 10 and again he says, "Rejoice, O Gentiles, with his people"; 11 and again, "Praise the Lord, all you Gentiles, and let all the peoples praise him"; 12 and again Isaiah says, "The root of Jesse shall come, the one who rises to rule the Gentiles; in him the Gentiles shall hope." 13 May the God of hope fill you with all joy and peace in believing, so that you may abound in hope by the power of the Holy Spirit.

### **MATTHEW 3:1-12 (ESV)**

1 In those days John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea, proclaiming, 2 "Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near." 3 This is the one of whom the prophet Isaiah spoke when he said, "The voice of one crying out in the wilderness: 'Prepare the way of the Lord, make his paths straight.'" 4 Now John wore clothing of camel's hair with a leather belt around his waist, and his food was locusts and wild honey. 5 Then the people of Jerusalem and all Judea were going out to him, and all the region along the Jordan, 6 and they were baptized by him in the river Jordan, confessing their sins. 7 But when he saw many Pharisees and Sadducees coming for baptism, he said to them, "You brood of vipers! Who warned you to flee from the wrath to come? 8 Bear fruit worthy of repentance. 9 Do not presume to say to yourselves, 'We have Abraham as our ancestor'; for I tell you, God is able from these stones to raise up children to Abraham. 10 Even now the ax is lying at the root of the trees; every tree therefore that does not bear good fruit is cut down and thrown into the fire. 11 "I baptize you with water for repentance, but one who is more powerful than I is coming after me; I am not worthy to carry his sandals. He will baptize you with the Holy Spirit and fire. 12 His winnowing fork is in his hand, and he will clear his threshing floor and will gather his wheat into the granary; but the chaff he will burn with unquenchable fire."

## **WEEKLY REFLECTION**

Drop your sword. Lift your hands. Embrace the wound. Every battle that raged against you is now his. Forfeit control. Release your worry. Stop, hear, listen, surrender, breathe. The presence of the Almighty is with you. Something greater than violence is here. Something greater than disturbance is here. Something greater than uncertainty is here. May the peace of Christ guard your hearts, not from catastrophe, but from unrest.

## WEEKLY PRAYER

God of peace,  
you entered into disorder.  
You considered it worthy  
to not just observe our suffering,  
but to enter into it.  
You endured the violent revolt  
of your own creation.

Let us hide under your wings.  
You are the cleft that houses us from the storm.  
You are the refuge when your enemies pursue us.  
You are the defender when Satan condemns us.  
You are the peace when our hearts are restless.  
May we find rest in your presence.  
Help us to be calmed by your power  
as it makes our heart its home.  
Guide us into new levels of stillness  
as we recess into you.

Amen.

## DAILY MEDITATIONS

### SUNDAY (DECEMBER 8)

#### PRINCE OF PEACE

My heart a storm, clouds raging deep within  
The Prince of peace came bursting through the wind  
The violent sky held its breath  
And in your light I found rest

*Tearing through the night*  
*Riding on the storm*  
*Staring down the fight*  
*My eyes found yours*  
*Shining like the sun*  
*Striding through my fear*  
*The Prince of peace met me there*

You heard my prayer  
Hope like the sunlight piercing through the dark  
The Prince of peace came and broke into my heart  
The violent cross, the empty grave  
And in your light I found grace

Your love surrounds me when my thoughts wage war  
When night screams terror, there your voice will roar  
Come death or shadow, God I know your light will  
Meet me there

When fear comes knocking, there you'll be my guard  
When day breeds trouble, there you'll hold my heart  
Come storm or battle, God I know Your peace will  
Meet me there

Oh, be still my heart  
I know that you are God  
Oh, fear no evil  
For I know you are here

#### Philippians 4:7

And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding,  
will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

#### John 14:27

Peace I leave with you; my peace I give you. I do not  
give to you as the world gives. Do not let your hearts be  
troubled and do not be afraid.

#### Romans 5:1

Therefore, since we have been justified through  
faith, we have peace with God through our Lord Jesus Christ.

#### Colossians 3:15

Let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, since as members  
of one body you were called to peace. And be thankful.

### MONDAY (DECEMBER 9)

#### MESSIAH FOR THE MAGI

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*"Now after Jesus was born in Bethlehem of Judea  
in the days of Herod the king, magi from the east  
arrived in Jerusalem, saying, 'Where is He who has  
been born King of the Jews?'" –Matthew 2:1-2*

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Unlike Luke, Matthew does not tell us about the shepherds  
coming to visit Jesus in the stable. His focus is immediately  
on foreigners coming from the east to worship Jesus.

So Matthew portrays Jesus at the beginning and ending of  
his Gospel as a universal Messiah for the nations, not just for  
Jews.

(CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE)

Here the first worshipers are court magicians or astrologers or wise men not from Israel but from the East—perhaps from Babylon. They were Gentiles. Unclean.

And at the end of Matthew, the last words of Jesus are, “All authority has been given to me in heaven and on earth. Go therefore and make disciples of all the nations.”

This not only opened the door for the Gentiles to rejoice in the Messiah, it added proof that he was the Messiah. Because one of the repeated prophecies was that the nations and kings would, in fact, come to him as the ruler of the world.

For example, Isaiah 60:3, “Nations will come to your light, and kings to the brightness of your rising.” So Matthew adds proof to the messiahship of Jesus and shows that he is Messiah—a King, and Promise-Fulfiller—for all the nations, not just Israel.

## TUESDAY (DECEMBER 10)

### BETHLEHEM’S SUPERNATURAL STAR

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*“Where is He who has been born King of the Jews?  
For we saw His star in the east and have come to  
worship Him.” –Matthew 2:2*

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Over and over the Bible baffles our curiosity about just how certain things happened. How did this “star” get the magi from the east to Jerusalem?

It does not say that it led them or went before them. It only says they saw a star in the east (verse 2), and came to Jerusalem. And how did that star go before them in the little five-mile walk from Jerusalem to Bethlehem as verse 9 says it did? And how did a star stand “over the place where the Child was”?

The answer is: We do not know. There are numerous efforts to explain it in terms of conjunctions of planets or comets or supernovas or miraculous lights. We just don’t know. And I want to exhort you not to become preoccupied with developing theories that are only tentative in the end and have very little spiritual significance.

I risk a generalization to warn you: People who are exercised and preoccupied with such things as how the star worked and how the Red Sea split and how the manna fell and how Jonah survived the fish and how the moon turns to blood are generally people who have what I call a mentality for the marginal. You do not see in them a deep cherishing of the great central things of the gospel—the holiness of God, the ugliness of sin, the helplessness of man, the death of Christ,

justification by faith alone, the sanctifying work of the Spirit, the glory of Christ’s return and the final judgment. They always seem to be taking you down a sidetrack with a new article or book. There is little centered rejoicing.

But what is plain concerning this matter of the star is that it is doing something that it cannot do on its own: it is guiding magi to the Son of God to worship him.

There is only one Person in biblical thinking that can be behind that intentionality in the stars—God himself.

So the lesson is plain: God is guiding foreigners to Christ to worship him. And he is doing it by exerting global—probably even universal—influence and power to get it done.

Luke shows God influencing the entire Roman Empire so that the census comes at the exact time to get a virgin to Bethlehem to fulfill prophecy with her delivery. Matthew shows God influencing the stars in the sky to get foreign magi to Bethlehem so that they can worship him.

This is God’s design. He did it then. He is still doing it now. His aim is that the nations—all the nations (Matthew 24:14)—worship his Son.

This is God’s will for everybody in your office at work, and in your neighborhood and in your home. As John 4:23 says, “Such the Father seeks to worship him.”

At the beginning of Matthew we still have a “come-see” pattern. But at the end the pattern is “go-tell.” The magi came and saw. We are to go and tell.

What is not different is that the purpose of God is the ingathering of the nations to worship his Son. The magnifying of Christ in the white-hot worship of all nations is the reason the world exists.

## WEDNESDAY (DECEMBER 11)

### TWO KINDS OF OPPOSITION TO JESUS

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*“When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled,  
and all Jerusalem with him.” –Matthew 2:3*

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Jesus is troubling to people who do not want to worship him, and he brings out opposition for those who do. This is probably not a main point in the mind of Matthew, but it is inescapable as the story goes on.

In this story, there are two kinds of people who do not want to worship Jesus, the Messiah.

The first kind is the people who simply do nothing about Jesus. He is a nonentity in their lives. This group is

represented by the chief priests and scribes. Verse 4: "Gathering together all the chief priests and scribes of the people, [Herod] inquired of them where the Messiah was to be born." Well, they told him, and that was that: back to business as usual. The sheer silence and inactivity of the leaders is overwhelming in view of the magnitude of what was happening.

And notice, verse 3 says, "When Herod the king heard this, he was troubled, and all Jerusalem with him." In other words, the rumor was going around that someone thought the Messiah was born. The inactivity on the part of chief priests is staggering—why not go with the magi? They are not interested. They do not want to worship the true God.

The second kind of people who do not want to worship Jesus is the kind who is deeply threatened by him. That is Herod in this story. He is really afraid. So much so that he schemes and lies and then commits mass murder just to get rid of Jesus.

So today these two kinds of opposition will come against Christ and his worshipers: indifference and hostility. Are you in one of those groups?

Let this Christmas be the time when you reconsider the Messiah and ponder what it is to worship him.

## THURSDAY (DECEMBER 12)

### GOLD, FRANKINCENSE AND MYRRH

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*"When they saw the star, they rejoiced exceedingly with great joy. After coming into the house they saw the Child with Mary His mother; and they fell to the ground and worshiped Him. Then, opening their treasures, they presented to Him gifts of gold, frankincense, and myrrh." —Matthew 2:10-11*

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God is not served by human hands as though he needed anything (Acts 17:25). The gifts of the magi are not given by way of assistance or need-meeting. It would dishonor a monarch if foreign visitors came with royal care-packages.

Nor are these gifts meant to be bribes. Deuteronomy 10:17 says that God takes no bribe. Well, what then do they mean? How are they worship?

The gifts are intensifiers of desire for Christ himself in much the same way that fasting is. When you give a gift to Christ like this, it's a way of saying, "The joy that I pursue (verse 10) is not the hope of getting rich with things from you. I have not come to you for your things, but for your- self.

And this desire I now intensify and demonstrate by giving up things, in the hope of enjoying you more, not things. By giving to you what you do not need, and what I might enjoy, I am saying more earnestly and more authentically, 'You are my treasure, not these things.'"

I think that's what it means to worship God with gifts of gold and frankincense and myrrh.

May God take the truth of this text and waken in us a desire for Christ himself. May we say from the heart, "Lord Jesus, you are the Messiah, the King of Israel. All nations will come and bow down before you. God wields the world to see that you are worshiped. Therefore, whatever opposition I may find, I joyfully ascribe authority and dignity to you, and bring my gifts to say that you alone can satisfy my heart, not these."

## FRIDAY (DECEMBER 13)

### WHY JESUS CAME

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*"Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery." —Hebrews 2:14-15*

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Hebrews 2:14-15 is worth more than two minutes in an Advent devotional. These verses connect the beginning and the end of Jesus's earthly life. They make clear why he came. They would be great to use with an unbelieving friend or family member to take them step by step through your Christian view of Christmas. It might go something like this...

Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood..."

The term "children" is taken from the previous verse and refers to the spiritual offspring of Christ, the Messiah (see Isaiah 8:18; 53:10). These are also the "children of God." In other words, in sending Christ, God has the salvation of his "children" specially in view. It is true that "God so loved the world, that he sent [Jesus] (John 3:16)." But it is also true that God was especially "gathering the children of God who are scattered abroad" (John 11:52). God's design was to offer Christ to the world, and to effect the salvation of his "children" (see 1 Timothy 4:10). You may experience adoption by receiving Christ (John 1:12).

"...he himself likewise partook of the same things [flesh and blood]..."

Christ existed before the incarnation. He was spirit. He was

(CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE)

the eternal Word. He was with God and was God (John 1:1; Colossians 2:9). But he took on flesh and blood and clothed his deity with humanity. He became fully man and remained fully God. It is a great mystery in many ways. But it is at the heart of our faith and is what the Bible teaches.

"...that through death..."

The reason Jesus became man was to die. As God, he could not die for sinners. But as man he could. His aim was to die. Therefore he had to be born human. He was born to die. Good Friday is the reason for Christmas. This is what needs to be said today about the meaning of Christmas.

"...he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil..."

In dying, Christ defanged the devil. How? By covering all our sin. This means that Satan has no legitimate grounds to accuse us before God. "Who shall bring any charge against God's elect? It is God who justifies" (Romans 8:33). On what grounds does he justify? Through the blood of Jesus (Romans 5:9).

Satan's ultimate weapon against us is our own sin. If the death of Jesus takes it away, the chief weapon of the devil is taken out of his hand. He cannot make a case for our death penalty, because the Judge has acquitted us by the death of his Son!

"...and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery."

So we are free from the fear of death. God has justified us. Satan cannot overturn that decree. And God means for our ultimate safety to have an immediate effect on our lives. He means for the happy ending to take away the slavery and fear of the now.

If we do not need to fear our last and greatest enemy, death, then we do not need to fear anything. We can be free: free for joy, free for others.

What a great Christmas present from God to us! And from us to the world!

## SATURDAY (DEC. 14)

### REPLACING THE SHADOWS

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*"Now the main point in what has been said is this: we have such a high priest, who has taken His seat at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, a minister in the sanctuary, and in the true tabernacle, which the Lord pitched, not man."  
—Hebrews 8:1-2*

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The point of the book of Hebrews is that Jesus Christ, God's Son, has not just come to fit into the earthly system of priestly ministry as the best and final human priest, but he has come to fulfill and put an end to that system and to orient all our attention on himself ministering for us in heaven.

The Old Testament tabernacle and priests and sacrifices were shadows. Now the reality has come, and the shadows pass away.

Here's an Advent illustration for kids (and for those of us who used to be kids and remember what it was like). Suppose you and your mom get separated in the grocery store, and you start to get scared and panic and don't know which way to go, and you run to the end of an aisle, and just before you start to cry, you see a shadow on the floor at the end of the aisle that looks just like your mom. It makes you really happy and you feel hope. But which is better?

The happiness of seeing the shadow, or having your mom step around the corner and seeing that it's really her?

That's the way it is when Jesus comes to be our High Priest. That's what Christmas is. Christmas is the replacement of shadows with the real thing.



## **CONVERSATION**

1. What does peace feel like?
2. Who do you know that is peaceful? What do they do that makes them peaceful?
3. How has God given you the freedom to be peaceful?
4. What can you do to bring peace to your home? What about your school? What about at church?
5. Is there an area of your life where you need peace?
6. Where do you look to find peace?
7. In what way can you be an instrument of peace?

## **COMMUNITY**

This week, gather your family and bake, cook, or buy your family's favorite dessert or snacks to give away to someone who might need some peace this Advent season. As you are making these treats (or walking the grocery aisles), talk with your children about who might appreciate getting a surprise goodie. Maybe a teacher, a neighbor, a community service worker or an employee of a store you visit often could use a nice visit from your family to drop off these treats. Talk to your family about how you can be peaceful in your relationships by delivering these treats and spending some time with these people.

## **CRAFT**

### MAKE AN ADVENT CALENDAR

#### MATERIALS NEEDED:

- 24 ct mini muffin pan
- Paper cut in circles the size of muffin tops
- Markers, paint, glitter
- Small tokens for each slot (verses about Jesus, snacks, ornaments, names for Jesus, etc.)

There are limitless ways to make an Advent Calendar for your home, but this craft project uses items you already have. With its 24 openings, a mini-muffin pan makes a perfect base for a treat-filled Advent calendar.

1. Cut 24 circles out of paper that are wide enough to fit over the openings in the muffin tin.
2. Decorate the top of the paper circles, and write a day number (1, 2, 3, etc. all the way through 24).
3. Gather something to put into each muffin slot. It could be a small note that each person writes about Jesus. It could be a small snack. It could be a small token or item from around your home.
4. Cover each slot with your paper circles.
5. Each day, open up the muffin slot for that day. Read the note, eat the snack, or talk about the item from around your home. Use this daily exercise as an easy way to start conversations about waiting for Jesus as a family.

# ***JOY***

W E E K 3

## ***ELEMENTS THIS WEEK***

### ***BREATHE IN***

- Scriptures ..... Page 17
- Reflection ..... Page 17
- Prayer ..... Page 18
- Daily Meditations ..... Page 18 -21

### ***BREATHE OUT***

- Conversations ..... Page 22
- Community ..... Page 22
- Craft ..... Page 22

## **WEEKLY READINGS**

### **ISAIAH 35:1-10 (ESV)**

1 The wilderness and the dry land shall be glad, the desert shall rejoice and blossom; like the crocus 2 it shall blossom abundantly, and rejoice with joy and singing. The glory of Lebanon shall be given to it, the majesty of Carmel and Sharon. They shall see the glory of the LORD, the majesty of our God. 3 Strengthen the weak hands, and make firm the feeble knees. 4 Say to those who are of a fearful heart, "Be strong, do not fear! Here is your God. He will come with vengeance, with terrible recompense. He will come and save you." 5 Then the eyes of the blind shall be opened, and the ears of the deaf unstopped; 6 then the lame shall leap like a deer, and the tongue of the speechless sing for joy. For waters shall break forth in the wilderness, and streams in the desert; 7 the burning sand shall become a pool, and the thirsty ground springs of water; the haunt of jackals shall become a swamp, the grass shall become reeds and rushes. 8 A highway shall be there, and it shall be called the Holy Way; the unclean shall not travel on it, but it shall be for God's people; no traveler, not even fools, shall go astray. 9 No lion shall be there, nor shall any ravenous beast come up on it; they shall not be found there, but the redeemed shall walk there. 10 And the ransomed of the LORD shall return, and come to Zion with singing; everlasting joy shall be upon their heads; they shall obtain joy and gladness, and sorrow and sighing shall flee away.

### **PSALM 146:5-10 (ESV)**

5 Happy are those whose help is the God of Jacob, whose hope is in the LORD their God, 6 who made heaven and earth, the sea, and all that is in them; who keeps faith forever; 7 who executes justice for the oppressed; who gives food to the hungry. The LORD sets the prisoners free; 8 the LORD opens the eyes of the blind. The LORD lifts up those who are bowed down; the LORD loves the righteous. 9 The LORD watches over the strangers; he upholds the orphan and the widow, but the way of the wicked he brings to ruin. 10 The LORD will reign forever, your God, O Zion, for all generations. Praise the LORD!

### **LUKE 1:46B-55 (ESV)**

46b "My soul magnifies the Lord, 47 and my spirit rejoices in God my Savior, 48 for he has looked with favor on the lowliness of his servant. Surely, from now on all generations will call me blessed; 49 for the Mighty One has done great things for me, and holy is his name. 50 His mercy is for those who fear him from generation to generation. 51 He has shown strength with his arm; he has scattered the proud in the thoughts of their hearts. 52 He has brought down the powerful from their thrones, and lifted up the lowly;

53 he has filled the hungry with good things, and sent the rich away empty. 54 He has helped his servant Israel, in remembrance of his mercy, 55 according to the promise he made to our ancestors, to Abraham and to his descendants forever."

### **JAMES 5:7-10 (ESV)**

7 Be patient, therefore, beloved, until the coming of the Lord. The farmer waits for the precious crop from the earth, being patient with it until it receives the early and the late rains. 8 You also must be patient. Strengthen your hearts, for the coming of the Lord is near. 9 Beloved, do not grumble against one another, so that you may not be judged. See, the Judge is standing at the doors! 10 As an example of suffering and patience, beloved, take the prophets who spoke in the name of the Lord.

### **MATTHEW 11:2-11 (ESV)**

2 When John heard in prison what the Messiah was doing, he sent word by his disciples 3 and said to him, "Are you the one who is to come, or are we to wait for another?" 4 Jesus answered them, "Go and tell John what you hear and see: 5 the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, and the poor have good news brought to them. 6 And blessed is anyone who takes no offense at me." 7 As they went away, Jesus began to speak to the crowds about John: "What did you go out into the wilderness to look at? A reed shaken by the wind? 8 What then did you go out to see? Someone dressed in soft robes? Look, those who wear soft robes are in royal palaces. 9 What then did you go out to see? A prophet? Yes, I tell you, and more than a prophet. 10 This is the one about whom it is written, 'See, I am sending my messenger ahead of you, who will prepare your way before you.' 11 Truly I tell you, among those born of women no one has arisen greater than John the Baptist; yet the least in the kingdom of heaven is greater than he.

## **WEEKLY REFLECTION**

Victory, love, new life, gifts, relief: All of these are events that draw us into that transcendent felicity. The coming of Christ is the commencement of all of these events. He is the ultimate victory, love, life, gift, and relief that we can experience. Let your joy be made complete by the expression of worship, adoration, and praise. For we delight to praise what we enjoy because it not merely expresses, but completes the enjoyment. It is its appointed consummation. It is the chief purpose of man; to acknowledge and respond to God as the greatest delight, and enjoy him forever. For no other time in history is he as near as he is now, and no other promise surpasses the one that recognizes he will only grow nearer.

## WEEKLY PRAYER

God of joy,  
we delight in knowing you.  
There is no greater love  
than that which you have offered us.

Help us to acknowledge your goodness  
so that our knowledge will become experience.  
May we complete our enjoyment of you  
with the outpouring of praise.

We rejoice because we know of your works.  
You've defeated death forever  
and invited us into the Kingdom of your Son.  
We rejoice because that Kingdom has begun  
yet awaits an even greater glory.  
We rejoice because all of these things  
remind us of your faithfulness.  
We rejoice because they will never be taken,  
destroyed, or replaced.  
We rejoice because the things you love  
are becoming the things we love.

Give us joy in all circumstances  
so all people can see a joy that is living, eternal, and true.

Amen.

## DAILY MEDITATIONS

### SUNDAY (DECEMBER 15)

#### Candle Light Reading #1 (Isaiah 61:1-3 ESV):

The Spirit of the Lord God is upon me, because the Lord has anointed me to bring good news to the poor; he has sent me to bind up the brokenhearted, to proclaim liberty to the captives, and the opening of the prison to those who are bound; to proclaim the year of the Lord's favor and the day of vengeance of our God; to comfort all who mourn; to grant to those who mourn in Zion - to give them a beautiful headdress instead of ashes, the oil of gladness instead of mourning, the garment of praise instead of a faint spirit; that they may be called oaks of righteousness, the planting of the Lord, that he may be glorified.

#### Prayer of Confession:

God of salvation, in Christ you have done great things -  
our hearts are filled with joy.

By your power you lifted us out of the wasteland of sin  
and brought us with joy and laughter into your kingdom.

Salvation is your gift to us.

But we confess that often we try to replace your gift with our  
own efforts.

We try to complete what is already perfect;

we try to add to what is already full;

we try to earn what we already have.

Forgive us for our foolishness.

Help us to focus on your grace.

Help us to live grateful lives in return.

Amen.

#### I WILL WAIT FOR YOU (SHANE AND SHANE):

Out of the depths I cry to you  
In darkest places I will call  
Incline your ear to me anew  
And hear my cry for mercy Lord

Were you to count my sinful ways  
How could I come before your throne  
Yet full forgiveness meets my gaze  
I stand redeemed by grace alone

*I will wait for you, I will wait for you  
On your word I will rely  
I will wait for you, surely wait for you  
Till my soul is satisfied*

So put your hope in God alone  
Take courage in his power to save  
Completely and forever won  
By Christ emerging from the grave

Now he has come to make a way  
And God Himself has paid the price  
That all who trust in him today  
Find healing in his sacrifice  
That all who trust in him today  
Find healing in his sacrifice  
*I will wait for You, I will wait for you  
Through the storm and through the night  
I will wait for you, surely wait for you  
For your love is my delight*

## MONDAY (DECEMBER 16)

### THE FINAL REALITY IS HERE

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*"Now the main point in what has been said is this: we have such a high priest, who has taken His seat at the right hand of the throne of the Majesty in the heavens, a minister in the sanctuary, and in the true tabernacle, which the Lord pitched, not man."  
—Hebrews 8:1-2*

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Christmas is the replacement of shadows with the real thing. Hebrews 8:1-2 is a kind of summary statement. The point is that the one priest who goes between us and God, and makes us right with God, and prays for us to God, is not an ordinary, weak, sinful, dying, priest like in the Old Testament days. He is the Son of God—strong, sinless, with an indestructible life.

Not only that, He is not ministering in an earthly tabernacle with all its limitations of place and size and wearing out and being moth-eaten and being soaked and burned and torn and stolen. No, verse 2 says that Christ is ministering for us in a "true tabernacle, which the Lord pitched, not man." This is the real thing in heaven. This is what cast on Mount Sinai a shadow that Moses copied.

According to verse 1, another great thing about the reality which is greater than the shadow is that our High Priest is seated at the right hand of the Majesty in heaven. No Old Testament priest could ever say that.

Jesus deals directly with God the Father. He has a place of honor beside God. He is loved and respected infinitely by God. He is constantly with God. This is not shadow reality like curtains and bowls and tables and candles and robes and tassels and sheep and goats and pigeons. This is final, ultimate reality: God and his Son interacting in love and holiness for our eternal salvation.

Ultimate reality is the persons of the Godhead in relationship, dealing with each other concerning how their majesty and holiness and love and justice and goodness and truth shall be manifest in a redeemed people.

## TUESDAY (DECEMBER 17)

### MAKING IT REAL FOR HIS PEOPLE

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*"Christ has obtained a ministry that is as much more excellent than the old as the covenant He mediates is better, since it is enacted on better promises."  
—Hebrews 8:6*

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Christ is the Mediator of a new covenant, according to Hebrews 8:6. What does that mean? It means that his blood—the blood of the covenant (Luke 22:20; Hebrews 13:20)—purchased the fulfillment of God's promises for us.

It means that God brings about our inner transformation by the Spirit of Christ.

And it means that God works all His transformation in us through faith in all that God is for us in Christ.

The new covenant is purchased by the blood of Christ, effected by the Spirit of Christ, and appropriated by faith in Christ.

The best place to see Christ working as the Mediator of the new covenant is in Hebrews 13:20-21:

*"Now the God of peace, who brought up from the dead the great Shepherd of the sheep through the blood of the eternal covenant [this is the purchase of the new covenant], even Jesus our Lord, equip you in every good thing to do His will, working in us that which is pleasing in His sight, through Jesus Christ, to whom be the glory forever and ever. Amen."*

The words "working in us that which is pleasing in his sight" describe what happens when God writes the law on our hearts in the new covenant. And the words "through Jesus Christ" describe Jesus as the Mediator of this glorious work of sovereign grace.

So the meaning of Christmas is not only that God replaces shadows with Reality, but also that He takes the reality and makes it real to his people. He writes it on our hearts. He does not lay his Christmas gift of salvation and transformation down for you to pick up in your own strength. He picks it up and puts in your heart and in your mind, and seals to you that you are a child of God.

## WEDNESDAY (DECEMBER 18)

### LIFE AND DEATH AT CHRISTMAS

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*"The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly."  
—John 10:10*

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As I was about to begin this devotional, I received word that Marion Newstrum had just died. She and her husband Elmer have been part of my church longer than most of our members have been alive. Marion was 87. They had been married 64 years.

When I spoke to Elmer and told him I wanted him to be strong in the Lord and not give up on life, he said, "He has

(CONTINUED ON NEXT PAGE)

been a true friend." I pray that all Christians will be able to say at the end of life, "Christ has been a true friend."

Each Advent I mark the anniversary of my mother's death. She was cut off in her 56th year in a bus accident in Israel. It was December 16, 1974. Those events are incredibly real to me even today. If I allow myself, I can easily come to tears, for example, thinking that my sons never knew her. We buried her the day after Christmas. What a precious Christmas it was!

Many of you will feel your loss this Christmas more pointedly than before. Don't block it out. Let it come. Feel it. What is love for, if not to intensify our affections, both in life and death? But, O, do not be bitter. It is tragically self-destructive to be bitter.

Jesus came at Christmas that we might have eternal life. "I came that they might have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). Elmer and Marion had discussed where they would spend their final years. Elmer said, "Marion and I agreed that our final home would be with the Lord."

Do you feel restless for home? I have family coming home for the holidays. It feels good. I think the bottom line reason for why it feels good is that they and I are destined in the depths of our being for an ultimate Homecoming. All other homecomings are foretastes. And foretastes are good.

Unless they become substitutes. O, don't let all the sweet things of this season become substitutes of the final great, all-satisfying Sweetness. Let every loss and every delight send your hearts "a-homing" after heaven.

Christmas. What is it but this: I came that they might have life. Marion Newstrum, Ruth Piper, and you and I— that we might have Life, now and forever.

Make your Now the richer and deeper this Christmas by drinking at the fountain of Forever. It is so near.

## THURSDAY (DECEMBER 19)

### GOD'S MOST SUCCESSFUL SETBACK

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*"Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow, in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord, to the glory of God the Father." –Philippians 2:9-11*

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Christmas was God's most successful setback. He has always delighted to show his power through apparent defeat. He makes tactical retreats in order to win strategic victories.

Joseph was promised glory and power in his dream (Genesis 37:5-11). But to achieve that victory he had to become a slave in Egypt. And as if that were not enough, when his conditions improved because of his integrity, he was made worse than a slave – a prisoner.

But it was all planned. For there in prison he met Pharaoh's butler, who eventually brought him to Pharaoh who put him over Egypt. What an unlikely route to glory!

But that is God's way – even for his Son. He emptied himself and took the form of a slave. Worse than a slave – a prisoner – and was executed. But like Joseph, he kept his integrity. "Therefore God has highly exalted him and bestowed on him the name that is above every name, so that at the name of Jesus every knee should bow" (Philippians 2:9-10).

And this is God's way for us too. We are promised glory if we will suffer with him (Romans 8:17). The way up is down. The way forward is backward. The way to success is through divinely appointed setbacks. They will always look and feel like failure.

But if Joseph and Jesus teach us anything this Christmas it is this: "God meant it for good!" (Genesis 50:20).

You fearful saints fresh courage take  
The clouds you so much dread  
Are big with mercy and will break  
In blessings on your head.

## FRIDAY (DECEMBER 20)

### THE GREATEST SALVATION IMAGINABLE

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*"Behold, the days are coming, declares the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah..." –Jeremiah 31:31*

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God is just and holy and separated from sinners like us. This is our main problem at Christmas and every other season. How shall we get right with a just and holy God? Nevertheless, God is merciful and has promised in Jeremiah 31 (five hundred years before Christ) that someday he would do something new. He would replace shadows with the Reality of the Messiah. And he would powerfully move into our lives and write his will on our hearts so that we are not constrained from outside but are willing from inside to love him and trust him and follow him.

That would be the greatest salvation imaginable—if God should offer us the greatest Reality in the universe to enjoy and then move in us to see to it that we could enjoy it with the greatest freedom and joy possible. That would be a

Christmas gift worth singing about.

That is, in fact, what he promised. But there was a huge obstacle. Our sin. Our separation from God because of our unrighteousness.

How shall a holy and just God treat us sinners with so much kindness as to give us the greatest Reality in the universe (his Son) to enjoy with the greatest joy possible?

The answer is that God put our sins on his Son, and judged them there, so that he could put them out of his mind, and deal with us mercifully and remain just and holy at the same time.

Hebrews 9:28 says, "Christ was offered once to bear the sins of many."

Christ bore our sins in his own body when he died. He took our judgment. He canceled our guilt. And that means the sins are gone. They do not remain in God's mind as a basis for condemnation. In that sense, he "forgets" them. They are consumed in the death of Christ.

Which means that God is now free, in his justice, to lavish us with the new covenant. He gives us Christ, the greatest Reality in the universe, for our enjoyment. And he writes his own will—his own heart—on our hearts so that we can love Christ and trust Christ and follow Christ from the inside out, with freedom and joy.

## SATURDAY (DECEMBER 21)

### THE CHRISTMAS MODEL FOR MISSIONS

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*"As you sent me into the world, so I have sent them into the world."—John 17:18*

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Christmas is a model for missions. Missions is a mirror of Christmas. As I, so you.

For example, danger. Christ came to his own and his own received him not. So you. They plotted against him. So you. He had no permanent home. So you. They trumped up false charges against him. So you. They whipped and mocked him. So you. He died after three years of ministry. So you.

But there is a worse danger than any of these which Jesus escaped. So you!

In the mid-16th century Francis Xavier (1506-1552), a Catholic missionary, wrote to Father Perez of Malacca (today part of Indonesia) about the perils of his mission to China. He said,

The danger of all dangers would be to lose trust and confidence in the mercy of God... To distrust him would be a far more terrible thing than any physical evil which all the enemies of God put together could inflict on us, for without God's permission neither the devils nor their human ministers could hinder us in the slightest degree.

The greatest danger a missionary faces is to distrust the mercy of God. If that danger is avoided, then all other dangers lose their sting.

God makes every dagger a scepter in our hand. As J.W. Alexander says, "Each instant of present labor is to be graciously repaid with a million ages of glory."

Christ escaped the danger of distrust. Therefore God has highly exalted him!

Remember this Advent that Christmas is a model for missions. As I, so you. And that mission means danger. And that the greatest danger is distrusting God's mercy. Succumb to this, and all is lost. Conquer here, and nothing can harm you for a million ages.

## **CONVERSATION**

1. What are you grateful for that gives you joy?
2. Who do you know that is always joyful?
3. How does God give you the freedom to be joyful?
4. How can you have joy when you are waiting?
5. How is gratitude related to joy for you?
6. Do you think of Jesus as being full of joy?

## **COMMUNITY**

Drive by a local farm where there are animals out in the pasture. If the weather (and safety) allows, get out and observe the surroundings of the farm setting, the buildings, and the animals. Take a moment to talk with your family about what it must have been like for Jesus to be born in a place like this. What does it say about God that He would be humbled to such a lowly birth? How could it be that such incredible joy would explode from a stable like this? How can your family keep joy in your everyday coming-and-going, even in the low times and low places?

## **CRAFT**

### MAKE A GIFT FOR SOMEONE ELSE

Do your kids like to paint? Does your teen take cool photos with her iPhone? Does your little guy have a penchant for creating masterpieces out of Legos? This is the perfect opportunity, just before Christmas Day, to take time together and make a gift for someone else. Even if all of your shopping has been “done” for a while, what a great opportunity to embody the joy of God by creating something as a family.

Think of whom in your life would especially appreciate a homemade gift. Use the opportunity to talk to your children about how this process is like God giving us a gift of joy. Make the process more about who the gift is for, rather than overseeing the “quality control” of what you are making together.



# ***LOVE***

W E E K 4

## ***ELEMENTS THIS WEEK***

### *BREATHE IN*

- Scriptures ..... Page 24
- Reflection ..... Page 24
- Prayer ..... Page 24 - 25
- Daily Meditations ..... Page 25 - 28

### *BREATHE OUT*

- Conversations ..... Page 29
- Community ..... Page 29
- Craft ..... Page 29

## **WEEKLY READINGS**

### **ISAIAH 7:10-16 (ESV)**

10 Again the LORD spoke to Ahaz, saying, 11 Ask a sign of the LORD your God; let it be deep as Sheol or high as heaven. 12 But Ahaz said, I will not ask, and I will not put the LORD to the test. 13 Then Isaiah said: "Hear then, O house of David! Is it too little for you to weary mortals, that you weary my God also? 14 Therefore the Lord himself will give you a sign. Look, the young woman is with child and shall bear a son, and shall name him Immanuel. 15 He shall eat curds and honey by the time he knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good. 16 For before the child knows how to refuse the evil and choose the good, the land before whose two kings you are in dread will be deserted.

### **PSALM 80:1-7, 17-19 (ESV)**

1 Give ear, O Shepherd of Israel, you who lead Joseph like a flock! You who are enthroned upon the cherubim, shine forth 2 before Ephraim and Benjamin and Manasseh. Stir up your might, and come to save us! 3 Restore us, O God; let your face shine, that we may be saved. 4 O LORD God of hosts, how long will you be angry with your people's prayers? 5 You have fed them with the bread of tears, and given them tears to drink in full measure. 6 You make us the scorn of our neighbors; our enemies laugh among themselves. 7 Restore us, O God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved. 17 But let your hand be upon the one at your right hand, the one whom you made strong for yourself. 18 Then we will never turn back from you; give us life, and we will call on your name. 19 Restore us, O LORD God of hosts; let your face shine, that we may be saved.

### **ROMANS 1:1-7 (ESV)**

1 Paul, a servant of Jesus Christ, called to be an apostle, set apart for the gospel of God, 2 which he promised beforehand through his prophets in the holy scriptures, 3 the gospel concerning his Son, who was descended from David according to the flesh 4 and was declared to be Son of God with power according to the spirit of holiness by resurrection from the dead, Jesus Christ our Lord, 5 through whom we have received grace and apostleship to bring about the obedience of faith among all the Gentiles for the sake of his name, 6 including yourselves who are called to belong to Jesus Christ, 7 To all God's beloved in Rome, who are called to be saints: Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

### **MATTHEW 1:18-25 (ESV)**

18 Now the birth of Jesus the Messiah took place in this way. When his mother Mary had been engaged to Joseph, but

before they lived together, she was found to be with child from the Holy Spirit. 19 Her husband Joseph, being a righteous man and unwilling to expose her to public disgrace, planned to dismiss her quietly. 20 But just when he had resolved to do this, an angel of the Lord appeared to him in a dream and said, "Joseph, son of David, do not be afraid to take Mary as your wife, for the child conceived in her is from the Holy Spirit. 21 She will bear a son, and you are to name him Jesus, for he will save his people from their sins." 22 All this took place to fulfill what had been spoken by the Lord through the prophet: 23 "Look, the virgin shall conceive and bear a son, and they shall name him Emmanuel," which means, "God is with us." 24 When Joseph awoke from sleep, he did as the angel of the Lord commanded him; he took her as his wife, 25 but had no marital relations with her until she had borne a son; and he named him Jesus.

## **WEEKLY REFLECTION**

God is love. It becomes impossible for us to experience or express love without involving God. Without God, love becomes self-serving or self-deprecating; it becomes a word that functions as a façade, a pleasure that hides the shallowness of what we pretend will sustain us. Love is more than this. It is rooted in the essence of God, so that its expression oozes from our Creator, and passes into us. Only then does love become "other" oriented; Only when we acknowledge the surrender and humiliation of God can we reciprocate surrender and humiliation for the sake of another. This is love. Love is not concerned with what it obtains, but what it offers. Advent is a season to remind us of when love became like us, to save us, to change us; Advent is a season to remind us when God loved us.

## **WEEKLY PRAYER**

God of love,  
how great and patient you are.  
We did nothing to earn your love,  
yet you freely gave it.

Humble us,  
so that we may accept your love  
and respond reciprocally.  
We desire to deny ourselves,  
so that our love for you may truly be complete.

Help us,  
so that we may rid our lives  
of the things that displease you.  
Enable us to love you and others  
with the same self-giving you exhibited.

Move of us from those who observe your love to those who participate in it. We ask that your Spirit accomplish through us the reconciliation you desire for all people.

Amen

## DAILY MEDITATIONS

### SUNDAY (DECEMBER 22)

#### Candle Lighting Reading #2 (A series of weekly readings from Isaiah) - from *The Worship Sourcebook*, p.439-440, #27

Jesus said, "I am the light of the world; the one who follows me will not walk in darkness, but have the light of life." **We light these candles as a sign of the coming light of Christ.**

The people who walked in darkness have seen a great light; those who lived in a land of deep darkness - on them light has shined. (Isaiah 9.2, NRSV)

I will lead the blind by a road they do not know, by the paths they have not known I will guide them. I will turn the darkness before them into light, the rough places into level ground. These are the things I will do and I will not forsake them. (Isaiah 42.16, NRSV)

The Lord says to his servant, "It is too light a thing that you should be my servant to raise up the tribes of Jacob and to restore the survivors of Israel; I will give you as a light to the nations, that my salvation may reach to the end of the earth." (Isaiah 49.6, NRSV)

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly; your vindicator shall go before you, the glory of the Lord shall be your rear guard. (Isaiah 58.8, NRSV)

Come, Lord Jesus, our Promise and our Salvation. Let us walk in the light of the Lord.

#### Responsive Reading (1 John 3:1-3 NIV):

1 See what kind of love the Father has given to us, that we should be called children of God; and so we are. The reason why the world does not know us is that it did not know him.

2 Beloved, we are God's children now, and what we will be has not yet appeared; but we know that when he appears we shall be like him, because we shall see him as he is.

3 And everyone who thus hopes in him purifies himself as pure.

#### O COME, O COME EMMANUEL (J. NEALE):

O come, O come Emmanuel  
And ransom captive Israel  
That mourns in lonely exile here  
Until the Son of God appear

*Rejoice, rejoice Emmanuel  
Shall come to thee O Israel*

O come thou dayspring come and cheer  
Our spirits by thine advent here  
Disperse the gloomy clouds of night  
And death's dark shadows put to flight

O come thou wisdom from on high  
And order all things far and nigh  
To us the path of knowledge show  
And cause us in her ways to go

O come desire of nations bind  
All peoples in one heart and mind  
Bid envy, strife, and quarrels cease  
Fill the whole world with heaven's peace

### MONDAY (DECEMBER 23)

#### CHRISTMAS IS FOR FREEDOM

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*"Since therefore the children share in flesh and blood, he himself likewise partook of the same things, that through death he might destroy the one who has the power of death, that is, the devil, and deliver all those who through fear of death were subject to lifelong slavery." -Hebrews 2:14-15*

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Jesus became man because what was needed was the death of a man who was more than man. The incarnation was God's locking himself into death row.

Christ did not risk death. He embraced it. That is precisely why he came: not to be served, but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many (Mark 10:45).

No wonder Satan tried to turn Jesus from the cross! The cross was Satan's destruction. How did Jesus destroy him?

The "power of death" is the ability to make death fearful. The "power of death" is the power that holds men in bondage through fear of death. It is the power to keep men in sin, so that death comes as a horrid thing.

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But Jesus stripped Satan of this power. He disarmed him. He molded a breastplate of righteousness for us that makes us immune to the devil's condemnation.

By his death, Jesus wiped away all our sins. And a person without sin puts Satan out of business. His treason is aborted. His cosmic treachery is foiled. "His rage we can endure, for, lo, his doom is sure." The cross has run him through. And he will gasp his last before long.

Christmas is for freedom. Freedom from the fear of death.

Jesus took our nature in Bethlehem, to die our death in Jerusalem, that we might be fearless in our city. Yes, fearless. Because if the biggest threat to my joy is gone, then why should I fret over the little ones? How can you say, "Well, I'm not afraid to die but I'm afraid to lose my job"? No. No. Think!

If death (I said, death—no pulse, cold, gone!)—if death is no longer a fear, we're free, really free. Free to take any risk under the sun for Christ and for love. No more bondage to anxiety.

If the Son has set you free, you shall be free, indeed!

## TUESDAY (DECEMBER 24)

### CHRISTMAS SOLIDARITY

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*"The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil." —1 John 3:8*

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The assembly line of Satan turns out millions of sins every day. He packs them into huge cargo planes and flies them to heaven and spreads them out before God and laughs and laughs and laughs.

Some people work full-time on the assembly line. Others have quit their jobs there and only now and then return.

Every minute of work on the assembly line makes God the laughing stock of Satan. Sin is Satan's business because he hates the light and beauty and purity and glory of God. Nothing pleases him more than when creatures distrust and disobey their Maker.

Therefore, Christmas is good news for man and good news for God. "The saying is sure and worthy of full acceptance, that Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners" (1 Timothy 1:15). That's good news for us.

"The reason the Son of God appeared was to destroy the works of the devil" (1 John 3:8). That's good news for God. Christmas is good news for God because Jesus has come to lead a strike at Satan's assembly plant. He has walked right into the plant, called for the Solidarity of the faithful, and begun a massive walk-out.

Christmas is a call to go on strike at the assembly plant of sin. No negotiations with the management. No bargaining. Just single-minded, unswerving opposition to the product.

Christmas Solidarity aims to ground the cargo planes. It will not use force or violence, but with relentless devotion to Truth it will expose the life-destroying conditions of the devil's industry.

Christmas Solidarity will not give up until a complete shutdown has been achieved.

When sin has been destroyed, God's name will be wholly exonerated. No one will be laughing at him anymore.

If you want to give a gift to God this Christmas, walk off the assembly line and never go back. Take up your place in the picket line of love. Join Christmas Solidarity until the majestic name of God is cleared and he stands glorious amid the accolades of the righteous.

## WEDNESDAY (DECEMBER 25)

### THE BIRTH OF THE ANCIENT OF DAYS

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*Then Pilate said to him, "So you are a king?" Jesus answered, "You say that I am a king. For this purpose I was born and for this purpose I have come into the world—to bear witness to the truth. Everyone who is of the truth listens to my voice." —John 18:37*

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This is a great Christmas text even though it comes from the end of Jesus's life on earth, not the beginning.

The uniqueness of his birth is that he did not originate at his birth. He existed before he was born in a manger. The personhood, the character, the personality of Jesus of Nazareth existed before the man Jesus of Nazareth was born.

The theological word to describe this mystery is not creation, but incarnation. The person—not the body, but the essential personhood of Jesus—existed before he was born as man.

His birth was not a coming into being of a new person, but a coming into the world of an infinitely old person.

Micah 5:2 puts it like this, 700 years before Jesus was born: "But you, O Bethlehem Ephrathah, who are too little to be among the clans of Judah, from you shall come forth for me one who is to be ruler in Israel, whose coming forth is from of old, from ancient days."

The mystery of the birth of Jesus is not merely that he was born of a virgin. That miracle was intended by God to witness to an even greater one—namely, that the child born at Christmas was a person who existed "from of old, from ancient days."

## THURSDAY (DECEMBER 26)

### THAT YOU MAY BELIEVE

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*"Now Jesus did many other signs in the presence of the disciples, which are not written in this book; but these are written so that you may believe that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, and that by believing you may have life in his name." –John 20:30-31*

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I feel so strongly that among those of us who have grown up in church and who can recite the great doctrines of our faith in our sleep and who yawn through the Apostles Creed—that among us something must be done to help us once more feel the awe, the fear, the astonishment, the wonder of the Son of God, begotten by the Father from all eternity, reflecting all the glory of God, being the very image of his person, through whom all things were created, upholding the universe by the word of his power.

You can read every fairy tale that was ever written, every mystery thriller, every ghost story, and you will never find anything so shocking, so strange, so weird and so spellbinding as the story of the incarnation of the Son of God.

How dead we are! How callous and unfeeling to his glory and his story! How often have I had to repent and say, "God, I am sorry that the stories men have made up stir my emotions, my awe and wonder and admiration and joy, more than your own true story."

The space thrillers of our day, like Star Wars and The Empire Strikes Back, can do this great good for us: they can humble us and bring us to repentance, by showing us that we really are capable of some of the wonder and awe and amazement that we so seldom feel when we contemplate the eternal God and the cosmic Christ and a real living contact between them and us in Jesus of Nazareth.

When Jesus said, "For this I have come into the world," he said something as crazy and weird and strange and eerie as any statement in science fiction that you have ever read (John 18:37).

O, how I pray for a breaking forth of the Spirit of God upon me and upon you. I pray for the Holy Spirit to break into my experience in a frightening way, to wake me up to the unimaginable reality of God.

One of these days lightning is going to fill the sky from the rising of the sun to its setting, and there is going to appear in the clouds one like a son of man with his mighty angels in flaming fire. And we will see him clearly. And whether from terror or sheer excitement, we will tremble and we will wonder how, how we ever lived so long with such a domesticated, harmless Christ.

These things are written that you might believe that Jesus Christ is the Son of God who came into the world. Really believe.

## FRIDAY (DECEMBER 27)

### GOD'S INDESCRIBABLE GIFT

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*"If while we were enemies we were reconciled to God by the death of his Son, much more, now that we are reconciled, shall we be saved by his life. More than that, we also rejoice in God through our Lord Jesus Christ, through whom we have now received reconciliation." –Romans 5:10-11*

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How do we practically receive reconciliation and exult in God? One answer is: do it through Jesus Christ. Which means, at least in part, make the portrait of Jesus in the Bible—the work and the words of Jesus portrayed in the New Testament—the essential content of your exultation over God. Exultation without the content of Christ does not honor Christ.

In 2 Corinthians 4:4-6, Paul describes conversion two ways. In verse 4, he says it is seeing "the glory of Christ, who is the image of God." And in verse 6, he says it is seeing "the glory of God in the face of Jesus Christ." In either case you see the point. We have Christ, the image of God, and we have God in the face of Christ.

Practically, to exult in God, you exult in what you see and know of God in the portrait of Jesus Christ. And this comes to its fullest experience when the love of God is poured out in our hearts by the Holy Spirit, as Romans 5:5 says.

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So here's the Christmas point. Not only did God purchase our reconciliation through the death of the Lord Jesus Christ (verse 10), and not only did God enable us to receive that reconciliation through the Lord Jesus Christ (verse 11), but even now, verse 11 says, we exult in God himself through our Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus purchased our reconciliation. Jesus enabled us to receive the reconciliation and open the gift. And Jesus himself shines forth from the wrapping—the indescribable gift—as God in the flesh, and stirs up all our exultation in God.

Look to Jesus this Christmas. Receive the reconciliation that he bought. Don't put it on the shelf unopened. And don't open it and then make it a means to all your other pleasures.

Open it and enjoy the gift. Exult in him. Make him your pleasure. Make him your treasure.

## SATURDAY (DECEMBER 28)

### THE SON OF GOD APPEARED

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*"Little children, make sure no one deceives you; the one who practices righteousness is righteous, just as He is righteous; the one who practices sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning. The Son of God appeared for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil." –1 John 3:7-8*

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When verse 8 says, "The Son of God appeared for this purpose, to destroy the works of the devil," what are the "works of the devil" that he has in mind? The answer is clear from the context.

First, verse 5 is a clear parallel: "You know that He appeared in order to take away sins." The phrase "he appeared to..." occurs in verse 5 and verse 8. So probably the "works of the devil" that Jesus came to destroy are sins. The first part of verse 8 makes this virtually certain "The one who practices sin is of the devil; for the devil has sinned from the beginning."

The issue in this context is sinning, not sickness or broken cars or messed up schedules. Jesus came into the world to help us stop sinning.

Let me put it alongside the truth of 1 John 2:1: "My little children, I am writing these things to you so that you may not sin."

In other words, I am promoting the purpose of Christmas (3:8), the purpose of the incarnation. Then he adds (2:2), "And if anyone sins, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus Christ the righteous, and He Himself is the propitiation for our sins; and not for ours only, but also for those of the whole world."

But now look what this means: It means that Jesus appeared in the world for two reasons.

He came that we might not go on sinning; and he came to die so that there would be a propitiation - a substitutionary sacrifice that takes away the wrath of God - for our sins, if we do sin.

## **CONVERSATION**

1. When has someone shown God's love to you?
2. Have you ever felt restrained and unable to love?
3. How does God give you freedom to experience his love?
4. Who do you know that needs some extra love during this season?
5. What is different between God's love and the world's love?
6. Why is it sometimes hard to love other people?
7. Does loving other people seem to get harder when you are waiting for something?

## **COMMUNITY**

Gather all the Christmas cards that your family has received. Spread them out on a table or counter, and take turns praying for each individual or family represented. Ask God to bless them in their specific situations and life seasons. Pray for God's love to be present in each life and each household through this season.

## **CRAFT**

### SET UP A SPECIAL NATIVITY SCENE

#### *MATERIALS NEEDED:*

- Nativity Scene pieces
- Baby Jesus figurine
- White cloth
- Bible (read the story of Jesus' birth from the Bible and put the pieces/characters on as they appear in the story) [John 1:1-18; Luke 1:5-80; Matthew 1:18-25; Luke 2:1-38; Matthew 2:1-38; Luke 2:39-40.]

Use this week to set up a nativity scene in your home. Usually, a nativity scene consists of figurines depicting baby Jesus, Mary, Joseph, the shepherds, three Wise Men (also called Magi), an angel, and some animals on the night of Jesus' birth. The purpose of the nativity scene is to remember the humble coming of God's freedom to earth and the amazing joy that surrounded his birth. If you don't have a nativity scene for your family, this is a great time to buy or even make your own. Just like the Advent Wreath, there is no "right" way to set up your nativity scene. You could cut out the figurines from construction paper or felt. You could even use LEGOs and Barbies, as long as your children understand what those figurines are representing! Try to get a figurine of Jesus and white cloth that you can wrap him in.

But this year, don't put Jesus in the scene just yet. Wait until Christmas morning to put him in the manger. As you are setting the scene without Jesus, take the opportunity to talk with your family about what all the other people in the scene were anticipating at this time. What was Mary thinking and feeling? What about Joseph? What about the shepherds, who had been waiting for the freedom of God's Messiah for hundreds of years? Do you think God gave the animals any special inclination that something so loving was about to happen in their stable?

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